

HURRICANE KATRINA

Mr. REID. Mr. President, the work that we have to complete in the waning days of this session is significant and difficult, and nothing we do in the days ahead can be more important than helping the victims of Hurricane Katrina get back on their feet. They are counting on us. It is their time of need. We owe it to them to give them everything we are capable of giving them.

The most terrible tragedies routinely bring out the best in America and Americans. We have seen that again in the aftermath of Katrina, one of the most horrible natural disasters in the history of this Nation.

Americans are coming together and giving their time and money to the millions of victims. They are putting their personal concerns aside so they can put Americans in need first. Now they expect America's Government to do the same.

There are dozens of steps the Senate can take in order to get immediate relief to the victims of the gulf coast—steps we can take to make sure Medicaid is easily and readily available to those who need it, to get families the housing assistance they badly need, and to get resources to the school districts all over the country so displaced children do not lose a precious day of this school year. These items must be our top priority.

I commend the majority leader for clearing the Senate Calendar of the estate tax so we can focus on Katrina. We can do better. Families in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida are counting on us to do that. They are suffering, and they have nowhere else to turn. We owe it to them to make their safety and survival our top priority, and we should give them nothing less.

RECESS

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate stand in recess prior to the hour that was chosen, just a couple of minutes early.

There being no objection, the Senate, at 12:28 p.m., recessed until 2:15 p.m. and reconvened when called to order by the Presiding Officer (Mr. VOINOVICH).

Mr. LEAHY. I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. HARKIN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

HURRICANE KATRINA

Mr. HARKIN. Mr. President, the entire Nation continues to be focused on the millions of Americans who have been devastated and displaced by hurri-

cane Katrina. My heart and prayers go out to the individuals and the families who have had to endure so much over the last 8 days; first, the natural disaster of Katrina and then the unnatural disaster of the delayed and deeply flawed relief effort.

Last week, as this tragedy was unfolding, I was on a congressional delegation in Afghanistan and Pakistan, among other things, meeting with members of the Iowa National Guard who are training units of the new Afghan Army. I will have more to report about that trip in coming days. While this tragedy was unfolding, most of the time I was in Pakistan watching. No matter where we went, it was on television, whether we were going to meet the President of Pakistan or whether we were going out to a small village to visit some schools we have helped to fund in the past in poor villages. Everyone had a television focused on it.

As I was there watching it unfold, I had this terrible feeling of helplessness; also, I must add, a feeling of embarrassment and being ashamed that our Government was not responding more forcefully to this disaster.

I will take advantage of this first opportunity to be back in the Senate to speak publicly about the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina. There is no question FEMA has failed and, more broadly, the Federal Government has failed the people of the gulf coast. In other parts of the country that are vulnerable to similar natural disasters or terrorist attacks, Americans are saying: There, but for the grace of God, go I, go me or my city. It is important those responsible for this systematic failure be held accountable and plans and procedures be put in place to avoid any recurrence of this failure.

I know I will not be the only Senator demanding hearings and rigorous oversight by Congress in the weeks ahead, but that is in the weeks ahead. That is down the road. Today, we must focus on the immediate and longer term human needs of the people of the gulf coast. As ranking member of the Agriculture Committee and of the subcommittee on Labor and Health and Human Services of the Committee on Appropriations I will do my part, again with my distinguished chairman, Senator CHAMBLISS of the Committee on Agriculture, and Senator SPECTER, who is chairman of the subcommittee on Labor, Health, and Human Services, along with Senator COCHRAN, the full chairman of the Committee on Appropriations, to see we provide maximum resources for relief and recovery efforts across the gulf coast region.

For instance, we need to make sure USDA, the Department of Agriculture, is able to meet the food needs of the victims and to assist hard-hit agricultural producers. We will also need to extend emergency Medicaid benefits to hundreds of thousands of victims. I will work closely with Senators and officials from Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, to ensure that their needs are fully and effectively met.

Indeed, in recent days, my staff has been meeting with Senator LANDRIEU's staff to share the experience and the expertise we gained in the wake of our widespread flooding in Iowa back in 1993. Some of the visual images, especially of New Orleans and some of the other towns along the gulf coast totally flooded with water, brought back memories of the flood of 1993 in Iowa, when whole towns were wiped out, some never to be rebuilt. People lost their homes, life savings, and mementos, such as pictures and family albums, the things that mean so much in our lives.

I remember 1993 and those floods in Iowa. At that time, I cochaired a task force, along with Senator KIT BOND of Missouri, whose State was also devastated by the same flooding, to identify the types of assistance that would be needed, as well as the best way to secure that assistance in Congress as well as in the executive branch. I am hopeful our past experience can provide a roadmap for officials responding to this latest disaster.

Some of the needed assistance is obvious, beginning, of course, with food. We must make sure these people who have been displaced to other States get adequate food and nutrition, and shelter, of course. It is so wonderful to see so many people opening their homes, their communities, their facilities, to take care of people who have been displaced from their own homes and communities. But we need to provide shelter in the longer term. Where is that going to come from? People cannot live for 6 months, 9 months, 2 years, in the Astrodome or in any other public facility which is housing these people now. We have to find adequate shelter.

Many of the people who have been displaced—let's face it, the vast majority are very poor people, and I will have more to say about that later—need health care assistance. Many of the communities are already at the breaking point, in terms of providing health care to the poorest of their citizens.

We need to be doing something about at least those three things—food, shelter and health care—right now. In the weeks and months ahead, more will be needed, including grants to individuals. Grants to individuals helped immeasurably in my State of Iowa after the flood of 1993, to help them move back, to get a start, to buy simple things like a bed, a stove, a refrigerator.

Loans will be needed to small businesses to get them back on their feet. Think of all the small Main Street businesses wiped out. They are going to need help to get back on their feet.

We need buyouts of homes in frequently flooded areas. Senator BOND and I also worked together after the flood of 1993 on hazard mitigation. Sometimes individuals located in an area constantly under flood threats or which has been flooded numerous times need to be relocated. We did that very effectively in both Iowa and in Missouri.